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THE POET—IS HE BORN, NOT MADE?*

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Thomas Fuller, in his terse English, said: "He must be well mounted who is for leaping the hedges of custom." There is perhaps no custom more deeply rooted in general confidence than the belief in apothegms. You make some statement which seems a little bold—which questions some received tenet—"Oh," says one, "but you know what the proverb says!" and, quoting it, seems to think the matter settled as certainly as if the reply came from the Delphian oracle of old. We should not now give any heed to the hysterical utterances of the priestess of Delphos. Let us inquire a little into the truth of a saying which has been placidly quoted through many ages, and to which our assent is so frequently demanded.

The saying in question, *Poeta nascitur, non fit*, the poet is born, not made, is attributed to one Florus—not the historian—but a writer of whom little is known, except that a few epigrams and fragments ascribed to him have been preserved. One of these epigrams, also relating to the poet, is this:

"Consules fiunt quotannis, et proconsules;
Solut poeta non quotannis nascitur."

Ben Jonson has introduced this in his play of "Every Man in his Humour," where Justice Clement, speaking of the poet, says:

"They are not born every year, as an alderman. There goes more to the making of a good poet than a sheriff."

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There is another version of this epigram which has been rather cleverly paraphrased by Taylor, the water poet:

“When Heaven intends to do some mighty thing,
He makes a poet—or at least a king.”

At the outset it must be understood that it is the second part of this adage that I assert to be untrue. No doubt the poet must be born a poet; the divine *œstrum* must be his as a birthright. You cannot by any known process of training or teaching make a poet of a man without this birthright; but it is equally true that the higher the teaching bestowed upon him, the broader the field of operation opened to him, the greater becomes the poet in proportion; and not only that, but it may be asserted that without such training, be it greater or less, the divine gift mostly comes to nought. What that training is, or should be, shall be presently considered.

Sir Philip Sydney, in his *Apologie for Poetry*, quotes the proverb in another shape: “A poet no industry can make if his own genius be not carried into it, and, therefore, it is an old proverb, ‘*Orator fit; poeta nascitur.*’” But he does not fail to protest against the implied meaning that genius is all that is needed to make the poet, for he continues: “Yet confess I always that as the fertilest ground must be manured, so must the highest flying wit have a Dædalus to guide him. That Dædalus, they say, both in this and in other, hath three wings to bear itself up into the air of due commendation; that is, art, imitation, and exercise.”

The “spontaneous theory,” as it may be termed, is not only of great antiquity, but it is continually reasserted in our own day. In a recent article in one of the English reviews, it was stated that Coleridge had stamped this doctrine with his high authority, and the following passage was quoted in proof:

“‘The man that hath not music in his soul’ can indeed never be a genuine poet. Imagery . . . , affecting incidents, just thoughts, interesting personal or domestic feelings, and with these the art of their combination or intertexture in the form of a poem, may all by incessant effort be acquired as a trade by a man of talents and much reading, who has mistaken an intense desire of poetic reputation for a natural poetic genius, the love of the arbitrary end for a possession of the peculiar means; but the sense of musical delight, with the power of producing it, is a gift of imagination; and this, together with the power of reducing magnitude into unity of effect, and modifying a series of thoughts by

some one predominant thought or feeling, may be cultivated and improved, but can never be learnt. It is thus that '*Poeta nascitur, non fit.*'" *

But surely the critic did not see that all that could be inferred from Coleridge's words was that the divine gift of poetic imagination came by birthright and not by acquisition. In another lecture, Coleridge, with indignation, rejects the often-repeated statement that Shakespeare wrote from inspiration only:

"What, then, shall we say? Even this, that Shakspeare, no mere child of nature; no automaton of genius; no passive vehicle of inspiration possessed by the spirit, not possessing it; first studied patiently, meditated deeply, understood minutely, till knowledge, become habitual and intuitive, wedded itself to his habitual feelings, and at length gave birth to that stupendous power by which he stands alone, with no equal or second in his own class; to that power which seated him on one of the two glory-smitten summits of the poetic mountain, with Milton as his compeer, not rival." †

Similar views are expressed by Schlegel:

"To me he appears a profound artist, and not a blind and wildly luxuriant genius. I consider, generally speaking, all that has been said on the subject a mere fable, a blind and extravagant error. In other arts the assertion refutes itself, for in them acquired knowledge is an indispensable condition of clever execution; but even in such poets as are usually given out as careless pupils of nature, devoid of art or school discipline, I have always found, on a nearer consideration of the works of real excellence they may have produced, even a high cultivation of the mental powers, practice in art, and views both worthy in themselves and maturely considered."

I must dissent from the judgment which makes Milton the compeer of Shakespeare. His wonderful epic poems are full of majestic verse, and the sweetness, and even tenderness, of his sonnets and shorter pieces is unexcelled, but in power of imagination and of displaying the workings of human passion, neither Milton nor any other poet of any age or nation can, it is thought, be regarded as the equal of Shakespeare.

Before the question can be properly debated, it is essential to have some clear understanding of what qualities go to the making of a true poet. Let us see what some of them have said as to this.

* Coleridge's works: Lectures on Shakespeare, Lond., 1890, pp. 492-495.

† *Ibid.*, p. 500.

One of the most essential of these qualities is imagination, or, as Ben Jonson terms it, in a spirited eulogium on poetry, "sacred invention." The passage is well worth your hearing, the more so as it does not appear in the ordinary editions of his works, which are copied from the folio, but is to be found in the quarto edition of the play which first gave him fame, "Every Man in his Humor: "

"Indeed, if you will look on poesy
As she appears in many, poor and lame,
Patched up in remnants and old worn-out rags,
Half-starved for want of her peculiar food,
Sacred invention, then I must confirm
Both your conceit and censure of her merit ;
But view her in her glorious ornaments,
Attired in the majesty of art,
Set high in spirit with the precious taste
Of sweet philosophy, and, which is most,
Crowned with the rich traditions of a soul
That hates to have her dignity profaned
With any relish of an earthly thought."

Bacon, elaborating a similar thought in Aristotle, said :

"The use of this feigned history (as he calls poetry) hath been to give some shadow of satisfaction to the mind of man in those points wherein the nature of things doth deny it, the world being in proportion inferior to the soul ; by reason whereof there is, agreeably to the spirit of man, a more ample greatness, a more exact goodness, and a more absolute variety than can be found in the nature of things. Therefore, because the acts or events of true history have not that magnitude which satisfieth the mind of man, poesy feigneth acts and events greater and more heroical. Because true history propoundeth the successes and issues of actions, not so agreeable to the merits of virtue and vice, therefore poesy feigns them more just in retribution and more according to revealed providence. . . . And therefore poesy was ever thought to have some participation of divineness, because it doth raise and erect the mind by submitting the show of things to the desires of the mind, whereas reason doth buckle and bow low the mind into the nature of things."

The quality first enumerated by Sydney, namely, art, includes imagination and idealism. Every poet of the first rank has idealized not only his characters, but all the phenomena of nature. An ideal perfection which their own minds had conceived enabled the Greek sculptors to excel nature. To the reproach of a fanatic writer that this was an impious thought, Sir Philip Sydney replied that it redounded to the honor of the Heavenly Maker that he should

create man with such power of creating. "Nature," he continues, "never set forth the earth in so rich tapestry as divers poets have done; neither with pleasant rivers, fruitful trees, sweet-smelling flowers, nor whatsoever also may make the too-much-loved earth more lovely. Her world is brazen, the poets only deliver a golden."

Proclus saw clearly the fallacy of the imitative theory of art:

"He who takes for his model the forms which nature produces, and keeps to a literal imitation of these, can never reach what is perfectly beautiful. Nature is full of disproportion, and falls short of the true standard of beauty."

Another quality of the poet named by Sydney is imitation—not plagiarism; but let us hear Ben Jonson's definition of it:

"The third requisition in our poet, or maker, is imitation, to be able to convert the substance or riches of another poet to his own use. . . . Not as a creature that swallows what it takes in crude, raw, or indigested, but that feeds with an appetite, and hath a stomach to concoct, divide, and turn all into nourishment. Not to imitate servilely . . . but to draw forth out of the best and choicest flowers, with the bee, and turn all into honey, work it into one relish and savor."

Emerson, more boldly still, asserts the right to use other men's thoughts:

"Thought is the property of him who can entertain it, and of him who can adequately place it. A certain awkwardness marks the use of borrowed thoughts, but as soon as we have learned what to do with them, they become our own." Elsewhere he says that the greatest genius is the most indebted man.

There must be a limit to this use of other men's thoughts. It has been wittily said that while we may imitate a man's garb, we must not borrow his clothes. We need not, perhaps, inquire where the idea came from, but what use is made of it, or we may be led at last to accuse a writer of plagiarizing from the dictionary.

Wordsworth's fine line:

"Wisdom married to immortal verse,"

embodies the loftiest conception of the poet's work. But is this wisdom spontaneous or acquired? Surely the latter. It is the result of learning, observation, and thought, and to these will neces-

sarily be joined the love of the true and the beautiful, or, in the words of the most impassioned of women poets:

“What is true and just and honest,
What is lovely, what is pure,
All of praise that hath admonisht,
All of virtue, shall endure;
These are themes for poets’ uses,
Stirring nobler than the Muses.
O, brave poets, keep back nothing,
Nor mix falsehood with the whole;
Look up Godward; speak the truth in
Worthy song from earnest soul;
Hold, in high poetic duty,
Truest truth the fairest beauty!”*

Let us listen to Wordsworth’s definition of poetry:

“The poet is chiefly distinguished from other men by a greater promptness to think and feel without immediate external excitement, and a greater power in expressing such thoughts and feelings as are produced in him in that manner. But these passions and thoughts and feelings are the general passions and thoughts and feelings of men. And with what are they connected? Undoubtedly with our moral sentiments and animal sensations, and with the causes which excite these; with the operations of the elements and the appearances of the visible universe; with storm and sunshine, with the revolutions of the seasons, with cold and heat, with loss of friends and kindred, with injuries and resentments, gratitude and hope, with fear and sorrow. These, and the like, are the sensations and objects which the poet describes, as they are the creations of other men, and the objects which interest them. The poet thinks and feels in the spirit of human passions, for all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings; and though this be true, poems to which any value can be attached were never produced on any variety of subjects but by a man who, being possessed of more than usual organic sensibility, had also thought long and deeply.”

Hear now what our own great thinker, Emerson, has to say:

“Poetry is the perpetual endeavor to express the spirit of the thing, to pass the brute body, and search the life and reason which causes it to exist; to see that the object is always flowing away, whilst the spirit or necessity which causes it subsists. Its essential mark is that it betrays in every word instant activity of mind, shown in new uses of every fact and image, and proportionately quickens the perception to relations. All its

* E. B. Browning: *The dead Pan*.

words are poems. It is a presence of mind that gives a miraculous command of all means of uttering a thought or feeling at the moment. The poet squanders on the hour an amount of life that would more than furnish the seventy years of the man that stands next him."

If it be true that poetry is the most philosophic of writings, dealing, as it does, with the general and not the particular, the highest poetry alone can merit the description. Shakespeare was not a scholar in the conventional sense, yet, not to speak of his genius, how full are his writings of knowledge, acquired by much reading, by wonderful insight into the minds of men and the springs of action, and by philosophy, the fruit of deep thought. His acquired knowledge, independent of his art, is so extensive that ingenious essays have been written to show that he must have been trained to the law, to medicine, to divinity; and separate books have been written upon his knowledge of birds, of animals, of flowers, and of folklore; and one surprising critic has gone beyond all, and declared that Shakespeare was a great statesman, a lord chancellor in fact, who was fined and imprisoned for accepting bribes.

And how thoroughly he possessed another of the lofty qualities of the true poet, impersonality. He creates his Portia, the model of virtuous loveliness, and his Cleopatra, the type of sensuousness, but he points out neither the merits of the one nor the vices of the other. He himself is never introduced; he has no didactic teachings, but the foreshadowed result is worked out. A critic commenting on this absolute impersonality of Shakespeare, and referring to the last scene of Anthony and Cleopatra, ends with this striking passage:

"He leaves the catastrophe to show us the inevitable end; the splendor of the feast is dimmed by no word of warning, the dancers whirl gaily by, the air is filled with the strains of music and the perfume of roses, but we see a handwriting on the wall, mysterious words in letters of flame, whereof the meaning is, 'God hath numbered thy kingdom and finished it; thou art weighed in the balances and art found wanting; thy kingdom is divided and given unto thine enemies!'"*

The opinion expressed of Shakespeare's wonderful genius by his friend and fellow-writer, Ben Jonson, in his introductory verses in the first folio edition of the former's works, is well known and has

* Dowden.

often been quoted, but one part of it is especially applicable to the present question :

“Yet must I not give nature all ; thy art,
My gentle Shakespeare, must enjoy a part ;
For though the poet’s matter nature be,
His art doth give the fashion ; and that he
Who casts to write a living line, must sweat,—
Such as thine are,—and strike the second heat
Upon the Muse’s anvil ; turn the same,
And himself with it, that he thinks to frame ;
Or, for the laurel, he may gain a scorn,—
For a good poet’s *made* as well as *born*.”

But the very loftiness of Shakespeare’s fame has unwittingly led to injustice to his contemporaries and successors. “Brave men lived before Agamemnon,” and the great writers who preceded, were coeval with, and followed Shakespeare, who filled

“The spacious times of great Elizabeth
With sounds that echo still,”

have been comparatively neglected in the almost idolatrous worship of the man who was supreme over all. The young student of literature should be warned not to study the great poets too exclusively, lest it tend to incapacitate the judgment. There is a rich harvest-field in the works of the minor poets, if the reaper be diligent and capable of selecting.

Another quality of the poet is his universality. The men of action, the politicians, take but one view, see but one side of a thing, and they are fearfully in earnest in their beliefs, but the man of philosophic mind weighs both or all sides of a question and gives each its due. Compare Scott with Warren. How true to nature are all the men and women in the novels of the first, and how the coarse prejudices of the politician disfigure the otherwise powerful works of the latter. He was such a bitter tory that in his ablest novel, *Ten Thousand a Year*, not only are all the radicals villains or vulgar knaves, but they have all, without exception, low and degrading names.

The poet must be, in a large sense, a man of science. He must learn at least to accurately observe. He may not analyze the blossom nor dissect the bird, but he must know what flowers bloom and what songs of birds are to be heard as the seasons change. He

must note physical phenomena and describe their sequence with the precision of a trained observer. Could the most skilled of scientific observers describe the coming on of a tempest as seen from a mountain peak more truly than the poet has done?

“As one that climbs a peak to gaze
O'er land and main, and sees a great black cloud
Drag inward from the deeps, a wall of night
Blot out the slope of sea from verge to shore,
And suck the blinding splendor from the sand,
And quenching lake by lake, and tarn by tarn,
Expunge the world.” *

Sir Philip Sydney insisted strongly that verse is not a necessary part of poetry :

“Sith there have been many most excellent poets that never versified, and now swarm many versifiers that need never answer to the name of poets. . . . It is not rhyming and versing that maketh a poet, no more than a long gown maketh an advocate ; who though he pleaded in armor should be an advocate and no soldier.”

He instances Xenophon's Retreat of the Ten Thousand and Nathan's parable, as poetry without rhyme or meter.

“When David,” he continues, “had so grievously sinned, and Nathan, the prophet, was sent to do the office of a friend in laying his shame before his eyes, how did he it? By telling of a man whose beloved lamb was ungratefully taken from his bosom ; the application most divinely true, but the discourse itself feigned.”

Emerson insists that cheerfulness is an essential part of a poet's composition :

“One more royal trait properly belongs to the poet. I mean his cheerfulness, without which no man can be a poet, for beauty is his aim. He loves virtue, not for its obligation, but for its grace ; he delights in the world, in men, in women, for the lovely light that sparkles from them. Beauty, the spirit of joy and hilarity, he sheds over the universe.”

Wordsworth, too, ends a spirited passage describing the subjects of which the poet must write with this characteristic and strong line :

“Of joy in widest commonalty spread.”

The poet must discover what form of meter will best enable him

* Tennyson.

to clothe his thoughts. He will probably make many experiments before he satisfies himself, and may retain, as many poets have done, the art of using several forms of meter. In Tennyson's first volume of poems, that is, the first exclusively his own, there are over twenty different forms of meter. He will not content himself with merely trying established meters, but may also invent original forms of his own.

A by no means unimportant part of the poet's work is the "polishing his lines." He must expunge mean, trivial words, and get rid of alliteration.

"Gently make haste, of labor not afraid;
A hundred times consider what you 've said;
Polish, repolish, every color lay,
And sometimes add, but oftener take away." *

Lowell, in a posthumous essay, says:

"It may be asked if these minutiae are consistent with anything like that ecstasy of mind from which the highest poetry is supposed to spring, and which it is its function to reproduce in the mind of the reader. But whoever would write well must *learn* to write. Shelley was almost as great a corrector of his own verses as Pope. Even in Shakespeare we can trace the steps and even the models by which he arrived at that fatality of phrase which seems like immediate inspiration. One, at least, of the objects of writing is, or was, to be read, and, other things being equal, the best writers are those who make themselves most easily readable."

Poets sometimes resort to artifices. Boileau communicated to Racine that notable receipt of making the second line of a couplet before the first.

But, above all, the poet must study the great central figure of this world—man. Descriptive poetry which delineates natural scenery soon becomes wearisome, but one never tires of the exhibition, if by a master hand, of the workings of the human mind.

"Othello," says a great writer, "is perhaps the greatest work in the world. From what does it derive its power? From the clouds? From the ocean? From the mountains? Or from love strong as death, and jealousy cruel as the grave?"

Having thus cited the views of some masters of the art, is it not obvious that they are alike in demanding for the poet that he shall

* Dryden: Art of Poetry.

receive fit training? That he is to be made a poet as well as to be born one? Much has been written about the spontaneous in poetry; that the poet should burst into song as naturally as the flowers bloom and the birds sing. As in most arguments by analogy, there is a fallacy in the premise, for the wild flower bears no comparison with the cultivated variety. The dog-rose grows spontaneously everywhere, but the roses which make our senses ache with their gorgeous colors and voluptuous odors are the product of cultivation. There is spontaneity in the songs of the birds, but every bird-lover can tell you that training and imitation of older singers are essential to make a good song-bird. Perhaps if we divested the song of its accompaniments, the beautiful plumage of the bird, its arch, dainty ways, the romantic woodland or the forest tree, we should judge better of the real beauty of the song. There is a legend of a contest between a bird and a lute, wherein the superiority of the human-made instrument is touchingly related. It is in a play by John Ford, one of Shakespeare's contemporaries. Two friends, Menaphon and Amethus, meet, the former accompanied by a beautiful youth:

“MENAPHON. Passing from Italy to Greece, the tales
Which poets of an elder time have feigned
To glorify their Tempe, bred in me
Desire of visiting that paradise.
To Thessaly I came; and living private,
Without acquaintance of more sweet companions
Than the old inmates to my love, my thoughts,
I day by day frequented silent groves
And solitary walks. One morning early
This accident encountered me: I heard
The sweetest and most ravishing contention
That art and nature ever were at strife in.

AMETHUS. I cannot yet conceive what you infer
By art and nature.

MEN. I shall soon resolve ye.
A sound of music touched mine ears, or rather
Indeed entranced my soul. As I stole nearer,
Invited by the melody, I saw
This youth, this fair-faced youth, upon his lute,
With strains of strange variety and harmony,
Proclaiming, as it seemed, so bold a challenge
To the clear quiristers of the woods, the birds,
That, as they flocked about him, all stood silent,
Wondering at what they heard. I wondered too.

AMET. And so do I; good, on!

MEN. A nightingale,
Nature's best skilled musician, undertakes
The challenge, and for every several strain
The well-shaped youth could touch, she sung her own;
He could not run division with more art
Upon his quaking instrument than she,
The nightingale, did with her various notes
Reply to; for a voice and for a sound,
Amethus, 'tis much easier to believe
That such they were than hope to hear again.

AMET. How did the rivals part?

MEN. You term them rightly,
For they were rivals, and their mistress, harmony.
Some time thus spent, the young man grew at last
Into a pretty anger, that a bird,
Whom art had never taught cliffs, moods, or notes,
Should vie with him for mastery, whose study
Had busied many hours to perfect practice;
To end the controversy, in a rapture
Upon his instrument he plays so swiftly,
So many voluntaries and so quick,
That there was curiosity and cunning,
Concord in discord, lines of differing method
Meeting in one full center of delight.

AMET. Now for the bird.

MEN. The bird, ordained to be
Music's first martyr, strove to imitate
These several sounds; which when her warbling throat
Failed in, for grief down dropped she on his lute,
And brake her heart."

But, leaving the analogy, does not the history of all poets tell us how they first "lisp'd in numbers?" Do we ever read the "juvenile poems" which form part of the collected works of the master, except from curiosity? Regard the progress of the greatest English poet of the century. Tennyson never saw fit to republish his volume of early poems, and no publisher has, I believe, ventured to print them in despite of his understood wishes. The volume in question, "Poems by Two Brothers," as it was modestly called, appeared in 1827. The publisher gave ten pounds for this collection of poems, a price which was thought to be, and was, a liberal one. At the present time that price is gladly paid for a single copy of the volume, so scarce has it become.

The first volume of poems exclusively his own was published in 1833, and the revision which his better-educated taste had taught him was well seen in the next volume, which appeared in 1842. Upon the appearance of the former volume, a merciless criticism appeared in the *Quarterly Review*, understood to have been written by the editor, Lockhart. It was, from some points of view, unfair, but it showed with relentless vigor all the weak points of the poet's work. After a silence of ten years, a new volume was brought out, which instantly placed Tennyson in the very foremost rank of English poets. It is a curious fact that the pieces which Lockhart had so severely criticised in the volume of 1833 were either entirely omitted in the next collection or were most carefully purged of their defects. A recent critic, Mr. Van Dyke, has given an illustration of the latter in the contrast between an original passage in the "Miller's Daughter" and the revised form in which it appeared in the volume of 1842.

A lover, gazing idly at the widening circles produced by something plunging in a pool, suddenly sees in them a beloved face and form :

"Remember you that pleasant day
 When, after roving in the woods
 ('Twas April then), I came and lay
 Beneath the gummy chestnut-buds
 That glistened in the April blue?
 Upon the slope so smooth and cool
 I lay and never thought of *you*,
 But angled in the deep mill-pool.

A water-rat from off the bank
 Plunged in the stream. With idle care
 Downlooking through the sedges rank
 I saw your troubled image there.
 Upon the dark and dimpled beck
 It wandered like a floating light,
 A full fair form, a warm white neck,
 And two white arms—how rosy white !"

These verses were true to nature—quite spontaneous in their freedom—but the inexorable critic had pointed out the curious mixture of metaphor and description—the gummy chestnut-buds, and the water-rat, and the rest, and, not too self-contained, but bent upon

mastery, the born poet, who was being made, printed the lines in this form in his next volume :

“O, Alice, what an hour was that,
 When, after roving in the woods
 ('Twas April then), I came and sat
 Below the chestnuts, when their buds
 Were glistening in the breezy blue ;
 How on the slope, an absent fool,
 I cast me down, nor thought of you,
 But angled in the icy pool.

Then leapt a trout. In lazy mood
 I watch'd the little circlets die ;
 They passed into the level flood,
 And there a vision caught my eye ;
 The reflex of a beauteous form,
 A glowing arm, a gleaming neck,
 As when a sunbeam wavers warm
 Within the dark and dimpled beck.”

Ruskin, commenting on some lines of Tennyson in the *Lady of Shalott*—

“In the stormy east wind straining,
 The pale yellow woods are waning,
 The broad stream in his banks complaining,
 Heavily the low sky raining,
 Over tower'd Camelot,”

says that this is a “a pathetic fallacy,” for clouds do not weep nor rivers complain. Could matter-of-fact realism further go? It does not need the divine spirit of the poet, the capacity to express great thoughts, to enable one to hear whispers in the trees, melody or complainings in the flowing water, and the voices of the gods in the thunder. Who does not feel that heaven wept for doomed man in that fine passage in *Christ's Victory*, when the just anger of God is about to be launched against the world, given over to wickedness?

“And the Almighty's self, as he would tear
 The Earth and her firm basis quite in sunder,
 Flamed all in just revenge and mighty thunder ;
 Heaven stole itself from Earth by clouds that moistened under.”

It is a common error in criticism to speak of the arts of poetry, music, and painting as if they were all parts of one system of imagi-

native thought, with the addition of varying technique, as of color in painting, sound in music, and rhythm in poetry; but it must be remembered—

“That the sensuous material of each art brings with it a special phase or quality of beauty, untranslatable into the form of any other—an order of expression distinct in kind.” *

The distinction of these sister arts does not affect the question of cultivation in each.

“We want design,” says Emerson, “and do not forgive the bards if they have only the art of enameling. We want an architect, and they bring us an upholsterer.”

It is a melancholy piece of work to look through such a collection as, say, Chalmers’s British Poets, and then to ask yourself how many of these men pronounced to be poets have been really among the immortals? Take out perhaps a dozen or twenty names, and you can safely wager that the rest will never have been heard of by ordinarily well-read persons. In the time of James I, one of the most popular of poets was Joshua Sylvester, and he was chiefly famous for his translation of the Divine Weekes of Du Bartas. Who ever quotes a line from the latter! And yet it has been said that no poet, except Voltaire, ever enjoyed such celebrity. And our own age is perniciously fertile in men and women with a “knack of rhyming.” If a great man dies, or a child is born, or a sunset is unusually red, out comes the ready sonnet or lyrical effusion, to which you listen decorously, but are tempted to repeat Christopher Sly’s words:

“’Tis a very excellent piece of work: would ’twere done!”

Macaulay tells us that Warren Hastings, when he had retired to a country life after his stormy public career had closed, was accustomed to read every morning at the breakfast table a sonnet or poem which he had written since rising. Such cruelty would seem to justify the charges made by Sheridan in his brilliant Begum speech.

“The art of versifying,” says Southey, “is a distinct talent, and a metrical ear has no more necessary connection with the intellect than a musical ear.”

* Pater: *Renaissance*, p. 135.

The versifiers are indeed the spontaneous poets; they carol away like the birds on the trees, without invitation or encouragement, and even in spite of warnings to desist. Carlyle said that in the golden age to come publishers and the public will pay authors for what they do not write.

Another characteristic of the poet is the honest love for, and belief in, the reality of his creations. They are living men and women to him, for they embody his wisdom and experience. They are better or worse than the average human being, but only to the extent of emphasizing the type. The poet is too true to his art to make moral monsters of his heroes. They are human, they sin, they repent, but how carefully the motives of their actions are developed. They are so real to him that he asks your charity for their shortcomings. Marmion had destroyed his rival by means of a forged letter, but after his own death on Flodden field, how artfully the poet makes the reader a supposed offender like the hero in order to bring in the tender verdict at the end:

“If ever, in temptation strong,
Thou left'st the right path for the wrong;
If every devious step thus trod
Still led thee further from the road,
Dread thou to speak presumptuous doom
On noble Marmion's lowly tomb;
But say, 'He died a gallant knight,
With sword in hand, for England's right.'”

Shakespeare brought his master creation, Othello, to a tragic death through his vehement passions and childlike credulity; but see how he cares for him at the supreme moment—how touching his defense of him in Othello's last words:

“Then must you speak
Of one that loved not wisely, but too well;
One not easily jealous, but, being wrought,
Perplexed in the extreme.”

What a surprising fullness of meaning there is in that word “wrought.” How it brings before us the whole panorama of subtle devices to which he has fallen a victim.

If his creatures seem real to the poet, how natural it is that he should inspire the same conviction of reality in the minds of his readers, and to achieve this he must have the power to detach his characters from his own thoughts; they must become objective.

How real are the heroes of the Iliad! Achilles eating his heart out in indignation in his tent; Hector forcing his way to the Grecian ships through a lane of carnage—how plainly we see him entering the archway with a spear in each hand, shaking the nodding terrors of his plume:

“He moves a god, resistless in his course.”

The very gods and goddesses, equally the creation of the poet, how real they are:

“The old gods, that bright and jocund train,”

as Goethe termed them, how natural it was that they should take sides in the ten years' fighting around Troy, and even enjoy an occasional share in it. When Athene puts on her immortal armor and, taking her mighty father's spear and shield, drives the “strong god of war” wounded and howling from the field, we care nothing for the allegory. It is needless to tell us that Athene personifies wisdom, and Ares brute force. We know that the fight took place, and are glad that the insolent bully received the merited punishment.

This wonderful power of inspiring a sense of reality is equally shared by the romancer, who is, at his best, a prose poet. Coleridge said that the best poet must write the best prose; and it is not only the great masters of fiction who possess this power. Even so formal a writer as Richardson could inspire this feeling. It is told that a village blacksmith who happened to obtain a copy of “Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded,” read it aloud every evening, while seated on the anvil in front of his shop, to the assembled villagers. Their patience was equal to the prolixity of the author, and they followed the heroine through her various adventures and perils with growing interest; so that when the lovers were at last united, a shout of joy arose from the rustic audience, and procuring the keys of the church, they rang peal after peal upon the bells, just as they would have done if the lord of the manor had brought home his bride.

James Russell Lowell relates that he one day met Thackeray with such evident traces of grief and even suffering upon his face that Lowell looked at him with alarm and sympathy. Thackeray, in response to the mute inquiry, said in a tremulous voice: “I have just killed Colonel Newcomb.” One can understand the emotion of the great-hearted author after writing that unequaled and pathetic scene.

The reader of poetry, too, must perhaps be born with the critical faculty :

“Both must alike from heaven derive their light,
These born to judge, as well as those to write.”

But cultivation is as necessary for the one as for the other.

“An accurate taste in poetry,” says Sir Joshua Reynolds, “and in all the other arts, is an acquired talent, which can only be produced by thought and a long-continued intercourse with the best models of composition.”

Who of us has not looked back with wondering pity at some of the favorite poems of our early days? Emerson sums it up :

“What we once admired as poetry has since come to be a sound of tin pans ; and many of our later books we have outgrown.”

There is another part of a poet's work to which, however, he is not necessarily called, which demands especial scholarship in addition to poetic art, namely, translating. It is not enough that he should thoroughly understand the language of his author—it is not enough to be a master of his own tongue—though both of these are pre-essential, but he must thoroughly comprehend the spirit and age of the original and be in some sort the poet he is to translate. How many generations of men who could not read a line of Homer have enjoyed Pope's translation? True, it is full of errors and faults of carelessness, but it is so melodious and the spirit of the age is so well sustained in it that we can say with Christopher North, “If it be not Homer we must be thankful for another *Iliad*.”

Upon the whole, it may be said, perhaps, that no poet has excelled Dryden as a translator. Nothing can be more perfect than his presentation of the spirit and feeling of the original in his version of the twenty-ninth ode of Horace, of which I will venture to quote one stanza :

“Happy the man, and happy he alone,
He who can call to-day his own ;
He who, secure within, can say,
To-morrow do thy worst, for I have lived to-day.
Be fair or foul, or rain or shine,
The joys I have possessed in spite of fate are mine.
Not heaven itself upon the past has power ;
But what has been, has been, and I have had my hour.”

There has been much debate as to when poetry took its origin. We know there were poets before Hesiod and Homer, and it has been asserted that pastoral poetry is as old as the human race. Strabo declares that poetry was the original language of men, and that prose is only an imitation. If this curious theory be correct, we should be obliged to look more pityingly upon the herd of versifiers, believing that their unhappy condition is in reality a case of atavism.

The early history of most nations was chiefly recorded in poetry; that of the Hindoos entirely so. The Mahabarata is an epic history, complete and compendious. The poet did not falsify history, but presented it by peculiar methods belonging to his art. When Shakespeare wrote his historical plays he gave to generations of readers a vivid picture of English history which they never would have learnt so thoroughly or impressively from ordinary writers. It cannot be questioned that poetry has the advantage over prose of condensation of thought and of attractiveness of sound, and from these qualities it is more readily stored up in the memory.

“ Well-sounding verses is the charm we use
 Heroick thoughts and virtue to infuse;
 Things of deep sense we may in prose unfold,
 But they move more in lofty numbers told:
 By the loud trumpet, which our courage aids,
 We learn that sound as well as sense persuades.” *

I have endeavored in this rapid and necessarily imperfect sketch of a very copious subject to describe the qualities which critics and poets concur in attributing to the true poet. I have endeavored to show that the greatest poets are those who have loved truth and wisdom above all things; who have striven valiantly after all attainable knowledge; have deeply studied the human mind and its passions; have observed nature with close scrutiny; have mastered to the extent of their opportunities the treasures of poetry and prose in their own and other tongues, and have diligently sought to perfect their art in melody and method. When to the divine birth-right some share, be it greater or less, of these qualities which are attainable only by labor is added, are we not justified in saying that the poet was born and was made? Or, in conclusion, it may be summed up in Aristotle's threefold division of poetry in relation to its progress: Nature without art; art begun; art completed.

* Waller.